

“It’s Not Supposed to Be This Way” – Revelation Part 4
Revelation 2:8-11 (Letter to Smyrna)

There were two men who tried to pull the front off of an ATM by running a chain from the machine to the bumper of their pickup truck. Instead of pulling the panel off the machine, they pulled the bumper off their truck. Scared, they left the scene and drove home, leaving the chain attached to the machine ... the bumper attached to the chain ... and their truck’s license plate attached to the bumper.

Did you hear about the man who got trapped in a vat of chocolate? A 21-year-old worker got into the vat to unplug it and became trapped waist deep in dark chocolate. Co-workers, police, and firefighters were unable to free him until they thinned the chocolate. There *is* such a thing as too much of a good thing!

Sometimes our problems are the result of our stupidity, and we leave our license plate as proof. Sometimes we’re just stuck in the chocolate and it’s not our fault. When that happens, when we’re trapped in Smyrna with no apparent way out, we wonder where our loving and powerful God is. And why he doesn’t help us.

Where has God disappointed you? [P] What pain has he not healed? [P] What burden has he not lifted? [P] What has brought you to Smyrna today? [P]

Today, we visit the second of the 7 churches of Revelation – Smyrna (modern-day Izmir). “Smyrna” is translated elsewhere in the NT as “myrrh.” Myrrh was a gum resin used to make perfume, oil & embalming fluid. We encounter it at the beginning of Jesus’ life as a gift of the Magi. We encounter it again at the end of his life as a gift of Nicodemus – 75 pounds of it to prepare his body for burial. Smyrna was so named because myrrh was one of the products traded through its port. It was extremely bitter. Smyrna, city of bitterness. For Christians living in Smyrna, though, bitterness was not just a name – it was a reality.

Smyrna was a *beautiful* city. She boasted the largest public theater in Asia. She claimed to be the birthplace of the poet Homer, with a grand monument in his honor. By contrast, the Christians living in Smyrna struggled for survival and lived in the most basic simplicity. They experienced none of her beauty and grandeur.

She was a *wealthy* city. The city lay on the eastern shore of the Aegean Sea, known for her magnificent harbor. While impoverished Christians struggled to support their families, much of the city lived in remarkable luxury.

She was a *pagan* city. She boasted temples to Apollo, Aphrodite, and Zeus. She became the first city in the world to erect a temple to the worship of Rome. In contrast, the Christians of this city met in humble, obscure places of worship, in the midst of some of the most stunning shrines in the Roman world.

She was a *proud* city. Smyrna was known as the proudest city in Asia Minor. She claimed to be the first in beauty, first in the art of poetry, first in the worship of Caesar. She was the center of all that was glorious and great. And so her people looked in utter contempt on the Christians and their distinctly humble way of life. [Pause]

Now, it's not supposed to be that way. If we are right with God, good things are supposed to happen to us, right? When they don't, we wonder why we should trust Him. [P] Why be faithful to God when hardship happens? Why not go along to get along? Why stand up to the emperor worship and pagan practices of the culture, if this is the thanks we get? Why be faithful to a God who seems to be silent to it all? "God, where is your love ... where is your power ... where is your deliverance ... Where are you?"

Surrounded by the might and riches of Rome, the fledgling band of believers may have wondered this. "How do we trust a Power we cannot see when the powers we can see are so enormous? Why keep faith in an invisible God, especially when it seems that such faith is losing the war? [Pause] Jesus' words to the church offer three truths to help us.

One: Our Lord hurts as we hurt.

Jesus declares: "*These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again*" (v. 8). He has *already* defeated our greatest enemy, so we have nothing to fear when we follow him.

He goes on in v. 9: "*I know your affliction.*" This word means "pressure" – like a heavy burden which presses down. Jesus knows the burden you are bearing today. But that is not all. Jesus adds, "*I know your poverty.*" This word describes a person who has nothing at all. But then Jesus adds, "*Yet you are rich!*" How can one who has nothing also have

everything? Because true riches are not found in this world. The Smyranean Christians had taken to heart the teaching of Christ – “Don’t store up treasures on earth where they come and go; store up treasures in heaven.” This kind of thinking was countercultural for Smyrna, and it still is today. Forsake the comforts and pursuits and prestige of this world – choose instead the way of the cross – the way of suffering and loss and rejection. In the eyes of the world, you are despised as nothing. In the eyes of your Savior, you are cherished as His beloved. “Yes, I know your poverty; but I know something you cannot yet fathom – You are rich, because you are mine!” [P]

Jesus, the First and the Last, assures them further: “*I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not.*” The early Christians faced persecution not only from Roman powers but from Jewish leaders as well. Paul had been one of those leaders, condoning the capturing, imprisoning, stoning and sentencing of those who worshipped Jesus as Messiah. Then in the early 2nd century, not that long after the book of Revelation was given to the churches, Jewish accusers denounced & executed Polycarp, a disciple of John, and a church leader in Smyrna. At his martyrdom, I wonder if he recalled the words of his Lord: “I know your affliction. I know the slander.”

Jesus doesn’t just sympathize – “I know what you’re going through” – words that usually bring little comfort to the one enduring so much. No, this Jesus – the one who experienced the depth of scorn, accusation, ridicule, torture, and death – can say more than any other has ever been able to say – “I know your affliction ... I know the slander.” He said it to the suffering Christians in Smyrna and he says it to you and me today. When the crucified and risen Christ says “I know” – it means he knows. He feels our pain and our pressure deeply. *Our Lord hurts as we hurt ...*

Two: Our Lord knows our present and directs our future.

Jesus flatly states, “*Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days*” (v. 10). He knows what will happen to them in the days to come.

Now, what about that part where Jesus says that they will be imprisoned and suffer for “*Ten days*”? Seems very specific. Well, let me mention just a couple things briefly. Remember, in apocalyptic literature like this book, numbers are often symbolic. The

number 10 (like the number 7) often represents fullness or completion. So in other words, their time of persecution will reach its completion – one day soon, it will come to an end. But the tone of this letter seems to point to something even more specific. While the persecuted could languish in prison for long periods of time, here the impending execution sounds swift. In the OT, Daniel and his colleagues were tested for 10 days (Dan. 1:12) and then exalted in the Babylonian court. The Smynean believers would be exalted as well – through their martyrdom.

Which leads to a challenge/promise in the rest of the verse: *“Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor’s crown.”* But this challenge and promise belong not only to the imprisoned Smyrneans – it is given to us as well. When we are faithful to the One who is ever-faithful, even if that faith means our death, we are given an eternal assurance from the Risen Christ himself – you will receive the *“victor’s crown.”* This was a familiar image to them – the garland wreath given to victorious athletes. We see the same charge and promise in Paul’s letters and in the book of Hebrews ...

“Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses (like a great colosseum filled with the faithful who have gone before us), let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” (Heb. 12:1-3)

We hear the charge over and over again – endure, persevere, overcome. How do we do it? Not in our strength and ability – but in his! Whenever we grow weary and lose heart, we are told to remember, again and again, the One who endured the suffering and shame of the Cross. Why did he do it? For the joy. What joy? The joy of redeeming us as His bride. *Christ overcame. And in him, we will overcome.* That is the message we hear again and again throughout this book – throughout the N.T. This is at the very heart of our Christian faith – this call, and this promise to Christ’s Church.

Be faithful. Endure. And receive the victor’s crown. But don’t get caught up in the image. Our reward is not a crown of garland. Our great reward is not even a crown of

gold and jewels. No. What does Jesus say in verse 10? “Be faithful ... and I will give you LIFE as your victor’s crown.” The crown, the victory, we await – that we long for – is life eternal with the One who is the Life!

But there is one more sentence in the letter to the Smyrneans, to make sure they didn’t miss it, to make it abundantly clear, to drive it home (to them and us): “*Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death*” (v. 11). What is the second death? Revelation 20:14 says “*The lake of fire is the second death*” – the place of final judgement for those whose name is not found written in the book of life – the book of the Lamb who was slain for us.

While such a place should stir us awake before our Holy God, don’t miss the focus of this verse – the intent of Jesus’ words: “To the one who finds their victory in Me, who lives their life from that victory in love and faithfulness ... *you will not be hurt at all by the second death.*” Yes, those in this world can take your life – at their hands, you may experience that momentary first death. But this world does not have the final word – it does not have power over My plans for you. Nothing in all of creation can, or ever will, separate you from My love – from the forever life you have in Me! [Pause]

So, the Lord *knows our hurt* ... He *directs our present and our future*. But we still wish the world wasn’t the way it is. We wish we didn’t have to suffer in Smyrna so often. Why doesn’t our Lord simply remove suffering, evil, and chaos and be done with it?

Three: Our Lord uses all that He allows.

Dr. Jim Denison: “What seems a tragedy of unredeemable proportion may lead to future good I cannot begin to comprehend.” I have absolutely no way of knowing how God is using present suffering for spiritual and eternal purposes. But I can believe that “*our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us*” (Rom. 8:18).

God never wastes a hurt. Everything he allows must achieve a perfect purpose. In fact, his holiness requires it. Deut. 32:4 says, “*His works are perfect, and all his ways are just; a faithful God who does no wrong.*” The holy God of the universe is compelled by his own character to redeem all that he allows.

You and I may not see such good until we're in glory, but we will see it there. For now, we see as through clouded glass, but there, we will see it all clearly – all the ways God used and blessed our pain and sacrifice, our suffering and loss. We will understand why he allowed our family to face such adversity, our efforts to encounter such opposition. He will transform all loss into gain. [P]

We have wrestled today with one of the greatest challenges we face in this life. [P] So here is my advice: Whenever you find yourself in Smyrna, fix your eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of your faith, the One who died and came back to life again!

Then remember that this same victorious Jesus knows your hurt ... directs your steps ... and will use it all for eternal good that we cannot begin to imagine. [P] The victor's crown of life awaits. Until then, may we be faithful to him who is the First and the Last. Amen.